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F Post 7/3/73

Laird will make Nixon accessible

By RAY CROMLEY

WASHINGTON (NEA)

After watching Melvin Laird in operation at the Pentagon for four years, it is easy to forecast that with Laird in the White House, President Nixon will find it impossible to seclude himself with the yellow pad and pencil for interminable intervals, whatever his inclinations. One way or another, the gregarious Laird will get the recluse Nixon reluctantly mixing with those men and women Laird believes essential to getting the President's job done.

The bouncy, politics-loving Laird will be a dominant figure at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Already, Laird men are in key posts. William Baroody, his legislative assistant in Congress and Pentagon aide, is now a White House political adviser. Mr. Nixon's special counsel, Fred Buzhardt, was a Laird-picked man at Defense.

Laird has had the reputation of being one of the few men in Washington able to say "no" to the President, Kissinger, Haldeman and Ehrlichman all in the same week, and to make the "no" stick in each case.

Overall, despite exceptions, he had his own way in the Vietnam war. He ran the Defense Department with little effective interference. He came to the job on his own terms as a favor to Mr. Nixon and left at a time of his own choosing.

Laird carries the heavy backing of the Republican party apparatus and the GOP bloc in Congress where he was long an influential figure. As never before, the President needs the help of orthodox Republicans.

Laird's congressional friendships go wider than the Republican minority. Witness this success with the Defense budget last year when military spending was not in high favor.

By contrast, Mr. Nixon has failed miserably in his own relationships with the legislators.

As for corruption and hanky-panky, colleagues tell me that Laird, while in Congress, was unwilling to trade his vote for what another congressman wanted in return for something he, Laird, desired for his district a strait-laced attitude almost unheard of on Capitol Hill.

There's no question Laird's move to the White House will lead to strong staff in-fighting and an end to orderliness and quiet. There are bound to be serious White House tilts as three strong men — Laird, John Connally and Treasury Secretary George Shultz — "try to mount one stool," each pushing vigorously his own views on bringing the economy into line.

Laird will be no domestic Kissinger. Though he's long had a deep emotional attachment to health, welfare, education and labor problems, some liberals find the conservative Laird more liberal than they, he does not have the same kind of expertise in economics, money problems and general finance that Kissinger has in the foreign field.

Though Laird is an economic conservative, men who know him well predicted that his move to the White House would mean a return to stronger economic controls. He has, these men say, an unerring nose for political realities, and the pressures for tighter controls were building up in both the Senate and House.

The President's announcement of a 60-day freeze and Phase IV prove Laird got his message through.

(NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.)